CANADIAN AGENDA FOR ACTION
ON HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS
THROUGH THE YEAR 2000

Prepared by:

The Canadian Association of Housing and Renewal Officials in consultation with other Canadian non-governmental organizations.

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BACKGROUND

In Canada, the major event to observe the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless was the conference held in Ottawa in early September. This conference was attended by approximately 1500 delegates from all around the world representing governmental and non-governmental organizations, community groups, interested citizens and the homeless themselves. Two Canadian non-governmental association, the Canadian Association of Housing and Renewal Officials (CAHRO) and the International Council on Social Welfare, Canada (ICSW) were the sponsors for the conference.

As a starting point, the conference adopted the United Nations definition of the homeless, to include:

> "The pavement dwellers, those who must sleep in doorways, subways, and recesses of public buildings and those rendered homeless by natural and man-made disasters, but also the hundreds of millions who lack a real home - one which provides protection from the elements; has access to safe water and sanitation; provides for secure tenure and personal safety; is within easy reach of centres for employment, education and health care, and is at a cost which people and society can afford."

From the preceding statement grew the objectives of the conference which guided its themes, its plenary sessions and its workshops. These were:

1) To identify needs and issues of homelessness in industrialized and developing countries.

2) To review and assess projects, programs and policies that are aimed at addressing the shelter needs of the homeless.

3) To draw on the experience of other countries in understanding and addressing homelessness both in Canada and around the world.

4) To identify new directions and innovative strategies for domestic homelessness and Canada's support for initiatives in developing countries.

5) To raise Canadian awareness of homelessness and shelter issues.

6) To provide a forum for communication and the development of new partnerships between groups and individuals working in the field of shelter.

The theme of the conference - "New Partnerships - Building for the Future" - reflected the necessity for innovative co-operation between the various sectors involved in housing, health and social development. The conference brought together a wide cross section of individuals with diverse connections to housing and homelessness in an effort to learn new ways of working together.

An important component of the conference was the participation of close to 100 housing leaders from the developing world. As part of a Canada Study Program, these individuals were involved in the conference and spent up to six weeks working with housing and community groups across Canada.

At the conference, a commitment was made by the organizers to produce a statement that would guide Canadian action on homelessness through the period until the year 2000, in keeping with the United Nations' objectives for IYSH. It was intended that this statement would express the understanding and concerns of the conference participants. It would also serve as an agenda for strategic action on addressing homelessness in Canada and for determining appropriate Canadian support for shelter initiatives in the developing world.

The statement as presented here has evolved since the conference through a process of consultation with representatives of Canadian NGOs with an active interest in the issues of housing and homelessness. It is intended that this process of consultation continue, to permit as wide a participation as possible by NGO's and community-based organizations across the country. The material presented here is by no means definitive and will continue to be shaped by the review and input of interested individuals and organizations.

This statement is based on two assumptions which should be noted upfront. The first is that this is an agenda developed from the perspective of NGOs and community-based organizations. These include non-profit organizations that are directly involved in the building and management of housing; those representing the interests of low-income groups or constituencies that are particularly vulnerable in relation to housing; and Canadian Third World development organizations. For purposes of the discussion here, NGOs can be distinguished from community based organizations by the fact that their sphere of action goes beyond the local level or project specific activity.

The second assumption, following from the conference, is that support for housing issues in developing countries can strongly complement the work for improved housing conditions in Canada. This agenda for action is based on the firm belief that there is no conflict between domestic and third world priorities, that Canada is a country with adequate resources to permit substantial improvements on both fronts. In fact, there are many advantages in establishing links between the work that is proceeding on improving housing conditions in developing countries and the NGOs working on Canadian issues. Both contribute to the important goal of raising the profile of housing issues generally.

UNDERSTANDING THE CURRENT REALITY OF HOMELESSNESS

While homelessness has become a problem of major proportions, no single government or international agency has an accurate estimate of the actual numbers of persons involved. Exact statistics are difficult to obtain, in large part because of problems of definition and the fact that homeless persons are rarely included in traditional methods of data collection.

The United Nations estimates that over one billion persons, one-quarter of the world's population, live in very poor quality housing without access to basic services. An additional 100 million are without permanent housing. Although the problems of poor living conditions are most marked in developing countries, there are also many millions of people who do not have secure or adequate housing in what can be referred to as the developed world. Housing has become a major global issue.

In third world countries, the pace of urbanization is a major phenomenon affecting homelessness. From 1975 to 2000, the urban population in these parts of the world is expected to grow from 811 million to almost 2 billion persons. In the large cities in the developing world, it is estimated that 40 to 50 percent of the inhabitants are living in slums and informal settlement. These squatter settlements, which are growing at an enormous pace, are characterized by overcrowded conditions and a lack of services and facilities such as piped water, disposal systems for human waste and garbage, electricity, public transit or health care. More than a third of the city dwellers in the developing world live in poor quality housing or sleep in public spaces with drastic consequences for their health, nutrition, education and employment.

In Canada, the lack of secure and affordable housing is a problem of increasing proportions. Within a narrow definition of homelessness, a national survey of hostel usage undertaken by the Canadian Council on Social Development estimated in 1987 that at least 100,000 persons used emergency shelters across the country. It is widely acknowledged that this figure omitted many more homeless Canadians such as those that avoid or have been rejected from the hostel system or those housed temporarily with friends or family. When the definition of homelessness is extended to include those with an affordability problem (a rent-to-income ratio over 30%) or those living in inadequate accommodation, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation estimates from 1980 show that more than 500,000 households are facing severe housing problems. While this figure provides some indication of the population at risk in relation to housing, it underestimates the severity of the situation as it is based on a survey which failed to include those living in such facilities as hostels and rooming houses. The housing conditions of rural Canada were also excluded although substandard housing continues to be a serious problem there along with the lack of appropriate forms of housing in small communities.

Canada's native people face chronic difficulties in addressing the deteriorating housing conditions that exist on reserves and in finding adequate housing in urban areas. A striking disparity exists between the housing occupied by Indian people and the balance of the Canadian population. On reserve housing is 22 times more likely to be crowded than non-Indian stock; nearly fifty percent of the housing requires major repair as compared to less than seven percent of the general stock; and 38 percent of the housing lacks running water or indoor plumbing compared to less than two percent in the rest of Canada.

To understand homelessness today, it is important to keep in mind the particular disadvantages that women experience in relation to housing. Changing demographics have left more and more women living on their own or with their children. At the same time, because of their secondary income status, these women-led households are increasingly vulnerable to homelessness. Women and children are the most intensive users of housing and the people who are most adversely affected by deficiencies in design and condition or a lack of available services and facilities. Historically, housing has been developed within narrow parameters to accommodate the traditional family. As a consequence, the location and structure of this housing may not be appropriate to serve the needs of the increasing number of household types, particularly those now headed by women.

NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

The message which came through very clearly at the IYSH conference was that the causes of homelessness both in Canada and developing countries should not be attributed to the deficiencies of individuals but instead must be traced to the failure of governments and economic systems to effectively deal with what has become a persistent condition. It has become evident that competitive market systems, without subsidies, cannot produce adequate or appropriate housing for low-income households. At the same time, the number of households that cannot afford to pay for even minimal housing is on the rise. It is apparent that the issues of housing and homelessness cannot be isolated from the enduring problems of unemployment, underemployment and inadequate incomes.

While the causes of homelessness in Canada and the developing world are distinct in many ways, unemployment and poverty contribute significantly in both. Lack of work or jobs which pay poverty-level wages is a major precondition of homelessness. Canadian employment policies have allowed unemployment, particularly acute in certain regions of the country, to become a permanent feature of the economy. As well, employment generation has been predominant in those sectors of the economy which pay very low wages. These economic conditions, combined with a social assistance system which provides inadequate levels of support, maintains a level of poverty which is the foundation of the country's housing problems.

Although the magnitude of the problem is more extreme, in the third world it is also poverty which cultivates conditions of homelessness. It is estimated that economic conditions are such that a quarter of the new city dwellers cannot afford even the most minimal type of housing in the developing world. It is significant to note that over one-half of the population works in the informal sector with the home often being an important centre of economic activity. Thus, in many of the urban areas, employment opportunities are severely restricted by inhuman living conditions, and in the absence of social systems of any kind, a vicious cycle of poverty and homelessess is perpetuated.

To fully grasp the nature of homelessness, it is important to understand that while poverty provides the essential context for the perpetuation of homelessness, the lack of secure housing is a problem which is structured by causes other than income inadequacy. Homelessness is essentially a housing problem. It must be clearly seen as a permanent condition which will continue to expand as more and more persons are excluded from participating in the private housing market. This reality is not widely understood as many policies and programs intended to address homelessness either do not deal with housing conditions and supply or are erratic and short-termed in nature. In many Canadian cities, the use of the term "housing crisis" implies a temporary situation and masks the chronic set of conditions which continue to place the majority of the housing stock out of the reach of low-income persons.

The core of the problem of homelessness is the lack of affordable housing. In the developing world, additions to the stock cannot keep pace with the rapid influx of population. The lack of secure land sites for housing presents a major obstacle to the production of decent shelter in the rapid growth areas. People living in spontaneous settlements are often without protection from forced evictions or natural disasters, leaving them vulnerable to massive disruptions. Opportunities for self-help housing are restricted by the lack of access to land, housing loans, affordable building materials and municipal services.

In Canada, traditional sources of low-cost housing stock, such as rooming houses, are disappearing, giving way to the process of gentrification in many inner-city neighbourhoods. Market pressures have led to significant increases of rent levels and changes of use which contribute greatly to the reduction of housing options for low-income households in most of the country's urban centres. The resources made available to public and non-profit housing producers have been insufficient to compensate for losses to the affordable stock.

A significant component of the homelessness problem is that housing has not been a high priority for governments. Whether establishing policies and programs on a national basis or for third world development, only a small proportion of government resources are directed to improving housing conditions. The debt burdens and tightening budgets of third world countries do not allow public investment in housing and infrastructure, and outside assistance is minimal. The United Nations estimated that if all aid projects involved with improving existing housing, or helping to produce new housing, were added up it would amount to around $1 billion a year, or less than two percent of the total aid flows to the developing world. Canadian involvement in assisting third world shelter projects follows this global pattern. Historically, Canada's official development assistance and non-governmental agencies have not seen housing assistance as a separate and important area of work except in the context of disaster relief.

Canadian housing policies reflect a similar lack of priority at the federal and provincial levels. Canada is without any overall national housing policy and the commitment to providing affordable housing at the federal level is waning. Because Canadian housing programs have been subject to substantial shifts over the last few decades, an unstable environment has existed for effective planning and development of affordable housing. The recent devolution of social housing funding to the Provinces is leading to great disparity in the provision of housing services across the country. National standards on affordable housing are in jeopardy as Federal funding is being reduced and as some provinces resist providing adequate program support. In all regions of the country, the demand for housing that is adequate and affordable to low-income persons, and the willingness of local organizations ready to build, greatly exceed the availability of government funds to carry out effective social housing programs.

PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE PLANNING AND ACTION

The field of housing, both in Canada and the developing world, has been characterized by a lack of thoughtful direction. Erratic policies and programs, many designed to fulfill other economic objectives, have been used to address the need for adequate and affordable housing. The principles that follow are proposed as a basis for establishing a stronger and more coherent Canadian housing strategy. It is intended that these principles serve as guidelines for future action.

1) *ACCESS TO SECURE HOUSING IS A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT*

This principle proclaims the right of all persons to secure, affordable housing which is in good condition. The struggle for recognition of the right to housing finds support in legislation passed at several jurisdictional levels. At the international level, the right to housing is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. Article 25 (1) states:

> "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control."

In Canada, although the new Charter of Rights and Freedoms governs national housing acts and all federal and provincial housing authorities, it is yet to be established how the provisions of the Charter would actually apply to housing. The minimal guarantees that do exist in relation to housing are most often found in provincial welfare legislation and these extend only to emergency shelter. Placing the responsibility for homelessness within the housing mandates of local governments as opposed to social services would constitute an improvement in achieving a recognition of permanent housing as a right.

It should be clearly noted that hostels and temporary shelters are inappropriate responses to homelessness and by no means uphold the right to housing. Emergency accommodation cannot be seen to take the place of a secure home. Indeed, the provision of temporary shelters can work against housing interests as these overnight shelters are stop-gap measures that give the illusion that homelessness is being addressed. Emergency shelters are an extremely harsh and disruptive living environment for the individuals and families that are forced to stay in them, providing neither privacy or security.

It is apparent that the issue of housing as a right in Canada must be further explored. American and British experiences should be carefully considered and legislative analysis undertaken with the objective of establishing a national model. A closer connection must be drawn between Canada's commitment to human rights and support for basic housing rights. This is particularly true in relation to third world activity where the democratic rights of communities to freely organize themselves is often a necessary pre-condition for self-help housing initiatives. Forced evictions, on the rise is certain developing countries, should be actively opposed by Canada as an intolerable breach of human rights.

2) *HOUSING SOLUTIONS MUST BE DEVELOPED WITHIN A BROAD ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONTEXT*

Housing and homelessness are situated within a complex social, economic and political structure. It is essential to the success of a longterm strategy on affordable housing that it not be developed in isolation. As discussed above, the problem of homelessness is intricately connected to employment and poverty issues. It is therefore essential that housing solutions, whether in Canada or the Third World, be developed in conjunction with planning in such areas as employment, health and income security. At the same time, the formulation of policies in these areas should be made with full knowledge of the housing implications.

As was stressed by the U.N. Centre for Human Settlements during IYSH, housing and shelter must be fully integrated into the national development process. Governments must accept that no real development can be achieved when large percentages of the population live in inhuman conditions. National housing policies should become a central economic and social concern rather than the preoccupation of isolated agencies and institutions. Only through such an integration at every level of planning can effective housing solutions be devised.

3) *HOMELESS PERSONS MUST HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO PARTICIPATE IN DEVELOPING THEIR OWN HOUSING SOLUTIONS*

Housing policies, programs and projects that are developed with the full input of persons without secure housing will have the highest chance of success. Homeless persons tend to have a powerless and marginal position within society. Participation in the development and management of their housing can provide a significant chance to recapture a sense of control. This involvement has proven also to be effective in creating housing that is more responsive to the needs of the residents and to encourage a strong sense of ownership. Wherever possible, housing should be explicitly planned in such a way as to expand the skills and competence of future occupants.

While Canadian groups have had some success in involving homeless persons in the development and management of housing, self-help models have become central to the delivery of housing in the Third World. In developing countries, it is homeless people who are responsible for the planning and construction of most new homes. As such, it is important that governments everywhere recognize the basic rights of low-income people to organize themselves into community and neighbourhood organizations to address their own housing needs. It should be noted that in the area of self-help development, much is to be gained by Canadians sharing the experiences of their third world counterparts.

It should be clearly stated that the promotion of a self-help approach should not be used as an excuse for governments to opt out of their responsibilities in the provision of funding, resources and support for the development of housing. As used here, self-help implies the full incorporation of people in need of housing in the decision making process to develop and manage that housing.

On this principle, it is important to highlight the necessity for women to participate fully in the provision of affordable housing. Women have a distinct set of housing needs based on their primary role in childcare and the complex juggling of work and schedules this entails. It is therefore essential that women be involved in the design and delivery of housing and neighbourhoods as well as complementary community services in order that these become more responsive to their needs. In Canada and the third world, the active participation of women in housing could be enhanced through skills training in a variety of the fields related to design, construction and management.

Another essential component of this principle of involving the homeless in defining their own solutions is the self-determination of native Canadians. Native housing programs have failed repeatedly to make substantial improvements to the housing conditions of Canada's native population. The First Nations themselves have only been able to play a marginal role in the development of the policies and programs affecting their housing stock. Native Canadians should be given the opportunity to take a leadership role in the design and full implementation of effective policies and programs for improving Indian housing conditions.

4) *SUCCESSFUL HOUSING POLICIES AND PROGRAMS MUST BE BASED ON RELIABLE INFORMATION*

Housing as a field is characterized by a lack of good data sources. Throughout IYSH, the lack of concrete information on the extent and nature of homelessness in Canada became apparent. Reliable demographic information, data on the changing patterns of household formation and family structure, and current sources of economic and social information are necessary for the formulation of good quality housing policies. In order for housing programs to be responsive and effective, research must be developed which addresses these gaps and which allows the involvement of housing users. Evaluation models are needed which allow the participation of non-profit development organizations and housing users in the ongoing assessment of programs and projects.

Another important component of improving information sources involves expanding communication between local organizations directly involved in project development and management. Mutual information exchange could enhance housing initiatives in Canada and the third world. Resources must be committed to support and expand information networks which encourage the exchange between community groups of practical information on ways to effectively organize and develop affordable housing. The importance of these information networks for enhancing training and research opportunities in housing must be emphasized.

5) *NGOs AND COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD ASSUME A LEAD ROLE IN THE DEVELOPMENT AND MANAGEMENT OF HOUSING FOR THE HOMELESS*

Throughout the IYSH conference, the theme of partnerships was highlighted. It became clear that homelessness is an issue which is the responsibility of all sectors within society. The development of longterm solutions requires the support of all major actors involved - the private housing and finance industry, community and neighbourhood organizations, and governments. The magnitude of the problem is such that all sectors must be prepared to work toward a strategy for securing housing for homeless persons. Within this context, NGOs and community-based organizations are best placed to take on a leadership role in the fight against homelessness, both in Canada and the third world.

If provided with adequate resources, NGOs and community organizations are in a position to act as effective educators, facilitators and implementors in developing appropriate housing solutions. These organizations often represent a broad range of society and are accustomed to being innovative and creative in the use of limited resources. The structure of these groups makes them best suited to involve and represent homeless persons in devising housing solutions. Experience has proven that NGOs are the most sensitive and effective in working with poor communities and have had the most success in developing housing with the full participation of residents. NGOs and community based organizations must be recognized for their unique strengths and provided with the funding to develop secure and affordable housing.

6) *APPROPRIATE HOUSING RESPONSES MUST BE DEVELOPED WITHIN A BROADER COMMUNITY CONTEXT*

Successful housing initiatives for the homeless in Canada and the developing world must go beyond basic accommodation. Housing must be developed in recognition of the other services required for the full development of the community being created. The type and level of services will depend on the population being housed and the location of the proposed development. In the third world, access to piped water and sewage disposal systems may be the critical consideration. The proximity of health and community services, public transit, employment opportunities are also important factors in creating housing options for the homeless. Given the increasing number of mother-led families experiencing housing problems, the availability of childcare facilities and safe play areas should also be a priority.

It is important to add a caveat on this issue to emphasize that utilization of support services should be entirely voluntary. Many problems have resulted from residential projects in Canada targeted to a homeless population which have required participation in a support program as a mandatory component of staying housed. Secure tenure of housing should not be affected by the use of services within supportive housing projects.

7) *CANADIAN GOVERNMENTS AT ALL LEVELS SHOULD PLAY AN ENABLING ROLE IN THE PROVISION OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING*

An effective strategy for action in addressing homelessness in Canada and the developing world will require the resources and commitment of governments. Enabling strategies at the government level which are based in legislation, programs, by-laws and codes constitute a critical component of Canada's successful follow-up to IYSH. All three levels of Canadian government hold significant influence in this area. The Federal level could substantially improve the housing environment through the financial and technical resources made available to developing countries and on the domestic level, through the structure and delivery of Native housing programs as well as the funding and planning for the implementation of the non-profit housing programs. The Provincial governments have recently expanded their role in funding and delivering social housing programs and also play a crucial role in providing support services for homeless persons. Municipalities have influence over land use planning and can be instrumental in facilitating access to affordable land. The commitment of governments to affordable and secure housing will be the essential ingredient for mobilizing the resources of NGOs and community-based organizations in tackling homelessness.

8) *THAT THE CANADIAN GOVERNMENT SHOULD EXPAND ITS SUPPORT FOR HUMAN SETTLEMENTS PROJECTS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES*

This principle is connected to the role of government as enabler. Canada should expand its development assistance aimed at improving housing and shelter conditions in the third world. Historically, Canada's involvement in shelter projects, particularly in the urban centres of the third world, has constituted a very small proportion of the total aid program. More resources need to be committed to develop a full Canadian program for supporting shelter initiatives in developing countries. It is important that this program be approached in a comprehensive way, responding to shelter needs as defined at the community level. In the third world, the poor and their communities are most knowledgeable of their own situation as they have become the city builders. Third world NGOs must be supported and given the opportunity to work through their Canadian counterparts in the development community.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SPECIFIC ACTION

The actions recommended below follow from the statements of principle. It shculd be noted that the IYSH conference did not produce many new strategies for action on a general level. While a tremendous amount of information relating to the details of organizing and developing housing was exchanged, the predominant overall strategy agreed on was to expand and keep on with the work we are doing. It is anticipated that the networks and cross-fertilization resulting from IYSH and the ongoing consultation around this agenda for action will continue to produce more directions for addressing homelessness.

It is recommended:

1) **THAT ACCESS TO SECURE HOUSING BE RECOGNIZED AS THE PREDOMINANT STRATEGY IN ADDRESSING HOMELESSNESS.**

2) **THAT ACCESS TO SECURE AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING BE INCORPORATED AS A RIGHT WITHIN CANADIAN LEGISLATION.**

3) **THAT INCREASING THE SUPPLY OF NON-PROFIT HOUSING BE ADOPTED AS THE ESSENTIAL ACTION FOR ELIMINATING HOMELESSNESS.**

4) **THAT HOMELESS PERSONS BE GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE FULLY INVOLVED IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING POLICIES, PROGRAMS AND PROJECTS.**

5) **THAT EVERY EFFORT BE MADE TO PROTECT THE EXISTING STOCK OF AFFORDABLE RENTAL HOUSING.**

6) THAT RESEARCH AND INFORMATION SOURCES ON HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS BE STRENGTHENED.

7) THAT THE NETWORK OF CANADIAN HOUSING PROVIDERS AND COMMITTED NGOs ESTABLISHED THROUGH IYSH BE MAINTAINED TO EXCHANGE INFORMATION AND MONITOR PROGRESS IN THE AREA OF HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS.

8) THAT A CANADIAN COALITION FOR THIRD WORLD SHELTER BE ESTABLISHED TO SUPPORT SHELTER PROJECTS AND THE NGOs, AND COMMUNITY GROUPS BUILDING HOUSING IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD AND TO PROMOTE PARTNERSHIPS WITH CANADIAN ORGANIZATIONS.

9) THAT A COMMITMENT BE MADE TO UNDERTAKE PUBLIC EDUCATION ON THE ISSUES OF HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS TO INCREASE SUPPORT FOR THESE INITIATIVES IN ALL SECTORS OF SOCIETY.

The following organizations were consulted during the preparation of this statement:

Assembly of First Nations

Canadian Council on Social Development

Canadian Institute of Planners

Co-operative Housing Foundation of Canada

Frontiers Foundation

Metro Tenants Legal Services

National Action Committee on the Status of Women

Native Council of Canada

National Anti-Poverty Organization

Rooftops Canada Foundation

Royal Architectural Institute of Canada

Social Planning Council of Metro Toronto

Urban Core Support Network

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